

## University of Dundee

### The Absolutely Other

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**Mary Modeen**, artist/academic, lectures in Fine Art and is Course Director for the MFA in Art & Humanities in Dundee. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and place-based research, which connects many of these concerns, with attention to cultural values, history and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, usually printmaking, and part as writing and presentations. She addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans. Cultural values and individual differences are inherent in these investigations.

**Ciara Healy** is a writer, book artist and curator. She lectures in Visual Culture at the University of Wales and was an AXIS & WAI award winner for Critical Writing in 2011. She is currently studying for a PhD at UWE Bristol under the research title: The Thin Perception: A proposal for a new curatorial approach in contemporary art.

# The Absolutely Other

Mary Modeen



# Mary Modeen: The Absolutely Other

by Ciara Healy

Certain places can be familiar to us, even when we know we have never seen them before. Such fleeting glimmers of recognition can penetrate the heart deeply, evoking what John Berger once described as “The gasp of Home.”<sup>1</sup>

It is in these moments that the intention of the soul is revealed. Like a forest clearing, we suddenly know where we are and why we are here. The point of confluence between now, and a more ancient then, opens the unfolding path that lies before us.

Mary Modeen’s collection of prints and bookworks explores these unpredictable clearings, these breaks in the homogeneity of space. They are anomalous places she has stumbled upon, liminal places she has deliberately sought to find; each of them imbued with a kind of sacred significance. They contain layers of concealed memory and beauty, which, when seen as a suspended whole, awaken us to the source of all love, or what the writer and philosopher John O Donoghue once called the ‘primal affection.’<sup>2</sup>

Love prompts our ability to imagine and when we are given the space to imagine we fall in love. This love, felt and experienced in countless bodies and sentient forms, existed long before we became the physical manifestations we currently occupy. So when we encounter work like Longing or Uncertain Territory, we remember the experience of love from another past, how it was lost, how it was found, how it was stolen, broken, betrayed, abandoned.

James Hillman argued that when we witness and experience this kind of convergence our consciousness is moved via our hearts rather than our eyes because this is where our imagination resides. So if the transference of past loves can be remembered in certain places, perhaps the imagination might permit us to temporarily occupy the many selves from which that love has been transferred.

Virginia Woolf referred to her ‘six little pocket knives’<sup>3</sup> as the tools she used to help her see and think from multiple perspectives. These ‘knives’ sliced the visual world around her into layers - through time - so that she could imagine seeing from more than her human form. She recalled in her diaries seeing a red hare one afternoon in the woods and suddenly realising:

**‘This is Earth Life. I seemed to see how earthy it all was, & I myself an evolved kind of hare; as if a moon-visitor saw me.’<sup>4</sup>**



The Absolutely Other makes tangible the feeling that we are floating above or outside of ourselves and that the whole universe of concrete objects, as we know them, swims with us in a wider universe of abstract yet interconnected ideas. What William James once described as a ‘belief in an unseen order.’<sup>5</sup>

In the 21st century such notions are often ridiculed. But vague impressions of something indefinable still manage to arouse us. It can happen at the end of an evening, when we have finally silenced the television, or early in the morning when grey light seeps through blinds: we remember that quieter truths exist, truths we know about in theory and have forgotten to live by in practice.

Modeen’s work is a liminal link to these truths. She stirs our languid imaginations, reminding us that the sudden transparencies through which one sees everything are only ever temporary. The sky is darkening, but the door still opens, the door goes on opening.

## References:

- 1 Berger, J., Michaels, A., Stehlíková, T., 2012. Railtracks, London: Go Together Press. P. 68
- 2 O'Donohue, J., 2004. Beauty: The Invisible Embrace. New York: HarperCollins. P 49.
- 3 Woolf, V., 1942. The Death of the Moth : And Other Essays. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. P 34.
- 4 Gwyn, R., 2011. Montaigne and the Acceptance of Uncertainty. Cardiff: New Welsh Review. Autumn 2011. P 54
- 5 James, W., 1985. The Varieties of Religious Experience, New York: Penguin. P 53.



**Mary Modeen**, Opposite page top to bottom:  
The Emperor of Ice-Cream, artist book (2012)  
Reflection (2013)  
Presencing (2013)

This page top to bottom:  
What Name is There For the Colour That Arouses this Thirst? (2012)  
Uncertain Territories, artist book (2010)  
Immersion (2013)  
Longing (2013)

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